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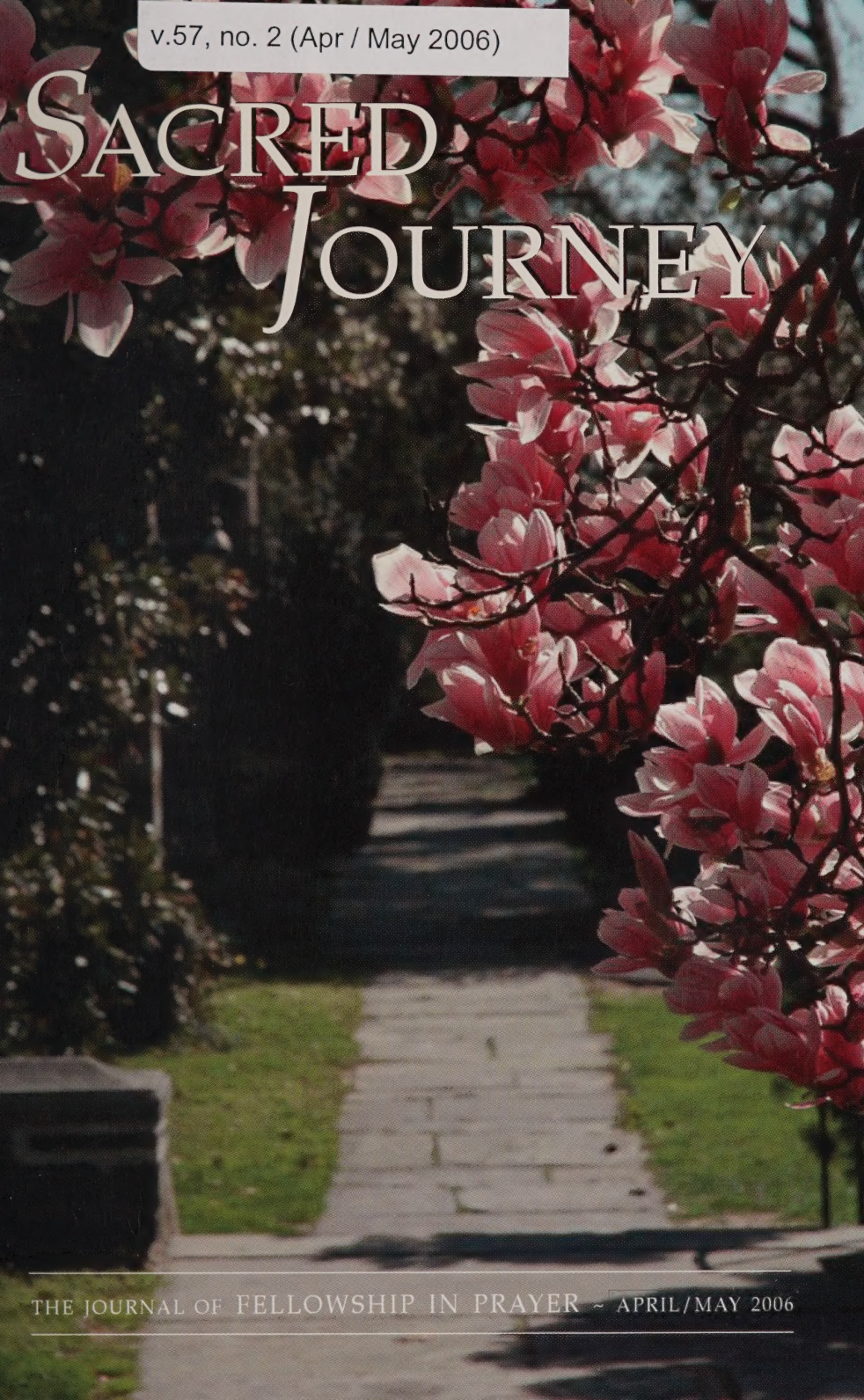

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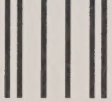

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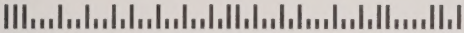

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"The Person We Most Long To Be"

"It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. . . Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say."

~ Thomas Merton

Nature is fully engaged in renewing itself again, with new life blossoming beautifully all around us. As we, too, reawaken with the spring, a sense of freshness, of new beginnings and hope, inspires many to plan a retreat during the warmer months ahead. A solitary retreat supports the inner journey to the unencumbered self, the "true" self as many would call it.

Dr. Reginald Ray, whom we feature in our interview, is one of those who will likely spend several months in solitary retreat in the Colorado Rockies this summer, as he has for decades. Dr. Ray fervently believes that this is "the pathway to the person we most long to be." He is not alone. Throughout history, people of all faith traditions have understood the value of solitude and meditation. Not as many have internalized this understanding through practice. There is a gulf between recognizing the value of solitary retreat and doing it, much less doing it regularly.

That gulf is filled with excuses, other priorities and commitments, and fear.

Dr. Ray says, "We are a very extroverted society. Even though within the Western tradition the practice of seclusion and retreat are very much a part of our own spiritual culture . . . most people are not aware of this. . . not only has the typical Western person spent little or no time alone, but many of us have an underlying fear of solitude."

Ray's description of the effect of solitary retreat is compelling:

> Your mind begins to slow down, your sense perceptions open up, you find yourself increasingly present to your life. . .
>
> We see for ourselves that within each human being is . . . a mind that is open and completely unencumbered. It is empty. And it gives birth to warmth and compassion for other people. . .
>
> The whole point of retreat is to develop your mind and your state of being so that when you're living your ordinary life you are more present to yourself and to your life and to other people. . .
>
> You can look at retreat as a practice to develop compassion for other people. "When you know how to relax into that deeper sense of yourself, you can be there for people in a way that you never could before. . . Far from being an antisocial practice, retreat practice frees you to love people in a uniquely powerful way. . ."

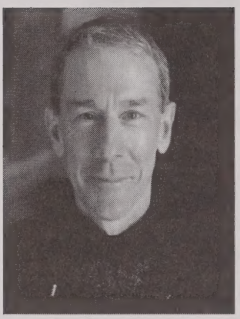
The other articles in this issue offer variations on the idea of going within for renewal and growth, and finding oneself more compassionate and available to others as a result, regardless of their nationality or faith tradition.

Perhaps you'll make time for a retreat this summer, and perhaps your journey will lead you into the realm of oneness where we are all connected in Divine unity.

OUR FEATURE

The Power of Solitude

An Interview with Dr. Reggie Ray



Dr. Reginald A. Ray studied Buddhism as a divinity student at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. In 1968, when he read Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's book, Born in Tibet, *he realized Buddha-dharma could be more than an intellectual pursuit. He met Trungpa Rinpoche two years later, and offered to leave divinity school and move to Trungpa's Vermont retreat center. Trungpa rejected this idea, instructing Ray to finish his degree, which Ray reluctantly did.*

Since then, Dr. Reggie Ray has become a respected scholar of Buddhism and historian of religion, as well as a senior teacher in Trungpa's lineage. He is professor of Religious Studies at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Until last year, he and his wife Lee were teachers in residence for seven years at the Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. They now live in Crestone, Colorado, amongst 14,000-foot mountains, where they have founded a non-profit foundation and a retreat center, the Dharma Ocean Foundation, where they continue to teach their students and transmit this lineage. (For more information, go to www.DharmaOcean.org.) Dr. Ray describes his teaching directon as "representing the practicing lineage of Chögyam

Trungpa and his own Tibetan teachers, and his written and oral instructions to my generation."

Dr. Ray has authored several books on the history, context, and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, including Buddhist Saints in India, Indestructible Truth, *and* Secret of the Vajra World. *He spends at least three months of every year in solitary retreat. Isolated retreat is a crucial component of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and Reggie Ray is one of the leading advocates of its value in the modern Western context. Ted Rose, a contributor to* Tricycle *magazine, spoke to Ray just before Ray headed into isolated retreat in a wood cabin in the Colorado Rockies.*

Ted Rose: When I mention my own experience of going into isolated retreat for ten days, most of my friends get a little suspicious. They think of another Ted who spent time in a cabin alone: Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber. Why do people often have such a negative impression of isolated retreat?

Reggie Ray: We are a very extroverted society. Even though within the Western tradition the practice of seclusion and retreat are very much a part of our own spiritual culture—the contemplative practices of Roman Catholicism, for example—most people are not aware that they are part of our heritage.

I think the other reason is that not only has the typical Western person spent little or no time alone, but many of us have an underlying fear of solitude. Possibly driving some of the misunderstanding of retreat is a deep-seated fear of being alone without distraction, without entertainment, without "work," without other people around to constantly confirm our sense of self.

We live in a culture driven by consumerism. Many of us feel, perhaps without realizing it, that unless we are "producing" in some sort of external, materialistic way, our legitimacy as a human being is somehow in question. We don't really see where retreat fits in.

What are the essential qualities of an isolated retreat? Is it possible to do without any meditation experience?

Many people who arrive at Naropa or up here at Shambhala Mountain Center have already had some experience of solitude. Without any real knowledge of retreat practice or even meditation, they've gone off into the woods or mountains in search of solitude. One of the things they often discover when they get into those situations is that they've brought their whole world with them. Their anxiety, their disturbing emotions, their mental speed, their mental preoccupations are just as present in solitude as they are in ordinary life. In fact, they may be even more prevalent. The problem is that they don't know what to do with their mind.

Retreat combines solitude and the practice of meditation, where you begin to actually explore your own mind. What you find is that, through intensive meditation in retreat, you begin to attend to your mind in a direct and unmediated way: Your mind begins to slow down, your sense perceptions open up, you find yourself increasingly present to your life, and you begin to experience solitude in a deep and genuine way.

The environment is solitude, but the essential ingredient is meditation practice—what you actually do with your mind when you are alone. Simply being in solitude is not good enough.

You mentioned the use of retreat practice in Roman Catholicism. Does that feature the same combination of solitude and meditation practice? Or is the structured meditation in retreat the unique offering from Buddhism?

Both Buddhism and Roman Catholicism employ structured "form" practices and the formless practices of working with awareness itself. Father Thomas Keating, who runs the Benedictine monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, teaches what he calls centering prayer. My understanding is that this is very much a mindfulness discipline, bringing the mind to a point and training it to be present, then allowing the inner wisdom to gradually unfold from that. If you look at the other contemplative orders in Roman Catholicism, I think you'll see quite similar practices.

Perhaps an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that, within the Christian tradition, there is usually a subject you are contemplating, whereas in Buddhism, especially with the formless practices, you are really opening the mind in and of itself; you are not contemplating a particular subject or figure. Ultimately, we are looking to simply open the mind and lay bare its depths. In Christianity you find that as well, so it's not an absolute difference but a difference in emphasis.

In the Buddhist universe, it seems like Tibetan Buddhism is the greatest champion of isolated retreat. Is that accurate?

In the Western presentation of Buddhism, you do tend to find that the Tibetan tradition is advocating

solitary retreat more than the other traditions. But in Asia, within both Zen and Theravada, you have a history of solitary retreat being very important.

For example, today, in all of the Theravada countries, in addition to the classical and conventional monasticism, there is a forest tradition. Within the forest tradition, monks live in isolation in the jungle, where they devote themselves to meditation all day and all night long.

In the Zen tradition, if you look back at the beginnings you find that the original Ch'an tradition was, to a large extent, a retreat tradition. These were people who also lived in the jungles and forests and practiced meditation in isolation. It was only later in the history of Ch'an that a more settled monastic tradition began to take precedence.

In the Japanese tradition, Dogen, who lived from 1200 to 1253, studied Buddhism in Japan, and he wasn't very happy with what he found. It didn't seem like the true dharma. He went to China and studied with a Ch'an master. When he came back to Japan, he established retreat centers in the countryside. Nowadays Zen is more associated with practice in the zendo and the community, but historically solitary retreat has been very important.

We've reached a point where people can see the value of practicing in a group but have a harder time seeing the value of being up in a cabin alone.

There is something uniquely powerful about meditating in a group—discovering community and a depth of discipline that people may not have individually. In a group retreat, the container is

provided, a framework of discipline surrounds you, and you are actually able to engage a level of sustained practice that you might otherwise be incapable of. You begin to see a lot of your habitual patterns relating to others and you begin to discover new ways of relating to other people. You learn to be with other people in silence. That is a huge discovery for people. So there are unique benefits from sitting together, especially for people in the early stage of practice.

But something happens on solitary retreat that cannot happen in a group situation and certainly doesn't happen during individual practice at home. We see for ourselves that within each human being is the Buddha-nature. What is the Buddha-nature? It is a mind that is open and completely unencumbered. It is empty. And it gives birth to warmth and compassion for other people. As a doctrine, this can be clearly explained, but it's another thing—and very shocking—to discover this within oneself. What solitary retreat practice provides that I don't think is possible in any other way is freedom from the distraction and the reinforcement and confusion of interpersonal relationships, so over a period of time your mind is able to open up to a much greater depth than would otherwise be possible.

We talk about living in the moment, but it's just a concept for most people. In retreat you actually learn how to do it. In fact, it occurs naturally.

What is the benefit of that kind of discovery?

The full benefit is not really realized in retreat itself. The whole point of retreat is to develop your mind and your state of being so that when you're living your

Robert F. Campbell

ordinary life you are more present to yourself and to your life and to other people.

You can look at retreat as a practice to develop compassion for other people. When you know how to relax into that deeper sense of yourself, you can be there for people in a way that you never could before, in a way that is not driven by your ambition and habitual patterns but rather where you see what other people really need. You see their experience from their side. You are actually able to get outside of yourself. Far from being an antisocial practice, retreat practice frees you to love people in a uniquely powerful way.

Most of us would love to be kind to others, to be compassionate, and yet we are so tied up with our own hope and fear, our own emotions and our own preconceptions, that we just can't do it; not really. Through retreat practice, we learn the pathway to the person we most long to be.

Let's step back a moment. What was your first retreat like? And how has your personal experience of retreat changed over the years?

Well, my initial exposure to the concept came when I first met Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1970. He had just come to the retreat center Tail of the Tiger [in northern Vermont], which is now called Karmê Chöling. He was talking about retreat practice. I saw that he was already sending people—people who had little meditation experience—into retreat, so I asked him, "Should I do a retreat?" And he said, "Absolutely." And I said, "Well, I've never done one before. I was thinking about doing a month." And he said, "That's

great. You can do it. No problem." Even though I had never meditated in my life. So he had enormous confidence in retreat practice. He presented it as the heart of our dharma: "This is who we are. We of the Kagyü lineage are practitioners and we do retreats. It's the point of our whole life."

So I planned a retreat. I did it in 1972 at Karmê Chöling. I didn't know what to expect. I had visions of peace and solitude and quiet and tranquillity. During the first week I discovered that I had the most agitated, chaotic, neurotic mind that I could have possibly imagined. My mind was insane. After one week, I couldn't take it anymore . . . sitting in that little cabin hour after hour. I said, "I'm sorry, I just cannot do this." I made myself stay till the end of the week, and then I left. Actually, I left in the middle of the night, running down the hill in the dead of winter in my bedroom slippers and pajamas. I had to get out of there. That was my first experience.

When I got out, though, I noticed my mind worked better. It was clearer, my sense perceptions were more steady, and I experienced a kind of openness to other people that I had never experienced before. And I realized that although the experience of my first retreat had been torture, the benefit was completely undeniable. So I planned my next retreat, which didn't happen for a year. But I actually did a whole month in a tent on a mountaintop in New Hampshire.

Pretty much every year since then I've done retreat. This summer it's going to be about three months, and I'd like to eventually edge my way up to six months a year. As I get older—I'm 62 now—my stamina is becoming more of an issue, so I don't know how much longer I'll be able

to go up on the mountain. There's a wonderful Kagyü saying: "When we are young, we don't realize the importance of dharma practice; when we are middle-aged, we think we are too busy to do it; and when we are old, it's too late." Now that I am finally, really realizing the tremendous, incalculable benefit of retreat, I am approaching a time when I won't be able to do it physically. This realization is not a little heartbreaking.

Do you find that your experience of retreat has changed over the years?

Truthfully, the first many years that I did retreat were spent working with a mind that was virtually without cessation, really very speedy, very tied up with thinking about things. I started to see that maybe ninety percent of the time in retreat my mind is in a very neurotic mode. And then there's this other thing, this depth of experience that seems to come out of nowhere. From the very beginning, I could tell that's where it was all heading, but I also realized it takes a very steady practice in order to cultivate that.

You can't just meditate for a few days and expect to live in the Buddha-nature. It takes a lifetime of practice to develop. But I've discovered that if you do the practice, the results manifest themselves. Now that's huge. This is not wishful thinking. Real, undeniable, and lasting transformation is what's at stake. That's what I try to communicate to my students. Number one: it takes work. Number two: it gets you to a place in your own life where maybe you really want to be more than anywhere else. So it's definitely worth doing.

Interview used with permission of Dr. Ray.

ILLUMINATIONS

In order to experience fearlessness, it is necessary to experience fear. The essence of cowardice is not acknowledging the reality of fear.

~ *Chögyam Trungpa*

Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless when facing them.

~ *Rabindranath Tagore*

To dare is to lose one's footing temporarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.

~ *Soren Kierkegaard*

And the time came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

~ *Anais Nin*

Do you really want to look back on your life and see how wonderful it could have been had you not been afraid to live it?

~ *Caroline Myss*

We are put on earth for a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love.

~ *William Blake*

Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking.

~ *Rumi*

We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.

~ *Joseph Campbell*

The rainbow's beauty consists of its many hues, and the grandeur of a symphony in its many harmonies and colorations. Unity does not mean uniformity.

~ *Rabbi J.H. Gelberman*

Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.

~ *Mother Teresa*

No one could make a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.

~ *Edmund Burke*

Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movements and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

~ *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

The most difficult times for many of us are the ones we give ourselves. Yet it's never too late or too early to practice loving-kindness. It's as if we had a terminal disease but might live for quite a while. Not knowing how much time we have left, we might begin to think it was important to make friends with ourselves and others in the remaining hours, months, or years.

~ *Pema Chödrön*

Whose God?

Danny Martin

I grew up with the idea that there is only one God who is the creator of all that exists. This childhood faith, shaped by a Catholic upbringing in Northern Ireland after World War II, has undergone a number of changes since those days. My challenge now, as an adult in this new century, is to find relevant language for talking about faith and God. But, for that to happen, I have to know whose God I'm talking about. The God of my childhood was probably someone else's God: the Fathers of the Christian church? My Irish Catholic culture? My family? I don't even know for sure what the people of my childhood really thought, for no

Danny Martin, a native of Belfast, Northern Ireland, was educated in Ireland, Italy, and the U.S. He was a missionary priest in Kenya in the 1970s before moving to the U.S. in 1984. In this country he has been director of an institute for global issues, a religious consultant to the UN Environment Program, and a speaker and retreat leader in the field of ecology and spirituality/ethics. He is Founder and President of Cross River Connections (CRC), which offers training and consulting in the field of personal, organizational, and social change through the art of Dialogue, which he defines as skilled interaction for creative outcomes. He is also founder and director of International Communities for the Renewal of the Earth (ICRE), a not-for-profit organization that fosters an ecological spirituality as the basis for a more creative and sustainable society. Recently, his focus has turned both to writing and (back) to the world of retreats (after an absence of some years), as a way of moving into the next stage of his journey. He lives in Cross River, NY with his wife, Ann D'Elia.

one really questioned the framework. However, for me, cracks have appeared in the façade over the years, that have allowed unexpected things to emerge.

Perhaps, my work as a missionary priest in Africa presented me with experiences that most widened the cracks until my assumptions about God and faith were blown right out of the water. One of the most memorable experiences occurred on Good Friday, 1974. I had arrived in the semi-desert lands of Kitui, Kenya, the previous fall, learned some of the language, and become involved in a number of activities, both religious and secular. In those years, after the 1960s had challenged some of the fundamentals of missionary work, there was a new emphasis on what was called humanization—health, education, community development—as opposed to, or at least as a counter-balance to, evangelization, the purely religious approach. I worked alongside volunteers—doctors, agricultural experts, engineers, etc.—on projects designed to enhance the physical as well as the spiritual lives of the people who lived in Kitui's challenging environment.

In Kitui, fresh water was perhaps the greatest challenge. Many of the wells that were dug turned out to be extremely saline and could be used only for general cleaning and washing. People usually drew their fresh water from the river beds which were simply highways of sand for most of the year, though when the rains came, these dry gulches became surging vortices of water that carried trees, rocks and sometimes humans in their path. The torrents would quickly subside to a trickle and, a few weeks later, disappear completely. The river, however, was still there under the sand and could be accessed by digging. A young Dutch water engineer had come up with a number of ideas for increasing access to this fresh water supply. I worked with

him on one rather fascinating effort to direct rain water run-off into the natural cisterns of a big rocky outcropping. The local people had been using the rocks as water tanks in this way for years, so the project was intended to enhance an already present natural water supply.

The project had gone well, at least in theory: all that remained was for the rains to come to see how it all worked. And so it was that, on this Good Friday, I had been invited with my Dutch colleague to be the guest of honor at the grand opening of the experiment. The local elders had come, along with their priest—the so-called witch-doctor—to offer a kid goat to the ancestors, as the people called the deceased members of the tribe, as a way of inviting these spirits to assist the process by pleading their cause with God: to send adequate rain, and to protect the women and children, who would come to fetch the water, from falling into the cisterns, some of which were ten feet deep or more.

The ceremony proceeded with prayers and chants and supplications, and the goat was slaughtered. As the guests of honor, the engineer and I were offered the choicest part of the sacrifice—the raw liver—to be consumed in front of everyone in all its gory beauty. My digestive tract was stronger than it is now, so I had little difficulty downing the fresh meat. But then, in the midst of all the excitement, I remembered that it was Good Friday. This is a solemn occasion for Christians of all stripes; for Catholics, it was a central event in the religious calendar that involved fasting and abstinence from meat. So, as the goat's liver slid gently through my alimentary canal, I mused on what some of my family, friends, and colleagues might say if they knew: number one, fresh liver on Good Friday; number two, and more to the point

of this story, participation in a so-called pagan ritual on this day of all days. To say that I felt a certain conflict of interests is to understate the situation: I was a missionary of the Christian Church, on behalf of the Christian God as my Catholicism defined him, sent to Kitui to promote the Christian way, and here I was implicitly endorsing, if not another God, certainly another understanding of him.

When the ceremony was over, I went back to the mission compound to participate in the Christian Good Friday ceremony that included what we called a "passion play," after the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Everyone participated in the pageant, children and adults alike. The play was taking place around the little tin-roofed church which was about seven or eight miles from the rock where I had celebrated the earlier ceremony. But on the horizon there was a different kind of action taking place in the form of gathering rain clouds. Since it was still about two weeks before the rains would come, and clouds would often form like this without actually producing anything, I paid only passing attention, and returned to the excitement of the play. A few minutes later, however, I looked out again over the heads of the people to see that a dark and heavy-looking cloud had gathered above the rock. Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning and the cloud opened to let its amazing burden of water spill onto the newly finished, newly blessed, water catchment. No one else seemed to notice, or perhaps they were simply not experiencing the confusion that was brewing in my mind.

Was this simply a lucky break for these people? Or had their prayers worked? Had God heard them—or their ancestors? But which God? Whose God?

I pushed the thoughts aside, figuring I would get back

Robert F. Campbell

to this interesting little divine joke later on. By this stage, the pageant was reaching its own climax and Andrew, our resident thespian, was being "nailed" to a make-shift cross. As the crowd joined in the general mêlée, the skies above us suddenly darkened, in true Biblical fashion, and there was a flash of lightning followed by a loud explosion of thunder. Down came the rain, cold and shocking. The final scene of the pageant collapsed in disarray as everyone rushed into the church where they broke into the spontaneous laughter that always greeted the arrival of rain in Kitui. As the noise level rose with the rain now pounding on the tin roof, people began to sing and dance. This time I was simply stunned, and sat amid the singing and dancing, filled with wonder.

It seemed clear that God did not distinguish between Catholics and pagans, but rained equally on both. That I already knew. But it seemed also that God heard the prayers of all his people. I suppose that didn't surprise me either. In that sense, nothing had changed for me. However, what began to be reinforced was my dawning realization that mission was not about creating a single, homogeneous organization. While there was much that western Christianity had to offer to Kitui, the people of this place had much to share with their visitors. We all believed there was only one God. For most tribal people, he was a distant reality who was hardly interested in the concerns of people like you and me. To them, it was pointless trying to contact this remote figure if there was a problem; it made more sense to go to the next level beyond themselves, namely the ancestors—the spirits of the dead—who had lived there and knew their problems, who were still family and would want to help, and who were now, presumably, in a position to do so. People

directed their prayers to them. Ngai (the name for God) was certainly to be acknowledged, but not much more.

So, what was so different about the Christian way? Well, the God of Jesus was supposedly interested in his people, and actually engaged in their lives. Who wouldn't want to know that the God you thought distant and uncaring, approachable only through mediators like one's ancestors, was actually much more like a deeply caring father who was present to your every need and concern? Jesus was very clear in his explanation of his way of relating to God: it was a matter of loving God by loving one's neighbor. Wouldn't it be enough to share the essential message with these people and let them figure out how to integrate it in the context that they obviously knew better than any outsider?

I had long since found that the essential message of Jesus was, in fact, already present here. Loving your neighbor as yourself is not something that any community has a monopoly on; certainly the Christian communities of my homeland (Northern Ireland) were not making much of a success of it just then. So what exactly were we doing here? In time, I began to see, from the example of many of my colleagues, that it was more a question of simply living this essential Christian way among these people whose lives were challenging in the extreme. To do so meant that relationships would grow and perspectives be shared in a way that allowed new insights about life to emerge that would then impact both sides of the exchange, as it does in any good exchange between equals.

At one stage I had feared that missionaries had become the unwitting accomplices of the western market, simply preparing people for the world of consumer goods that was on the way. There is a part of this that is true, I suppose: the

missionary schools did educate children away from their traditions and proclaim the values of another world, while the hospitals to some extent created a new market for western drug companies. But there was much more going on than this. As I heard many times from African people, the missionaries, with obvious exceptions, were good people who cared for them and asked nothing in return. Sometimes, the missionaries were somewhat righteous, implying that their way was the more developed, civilized way, but in spite of this, what came across was genuine love.

As it has turned out, Africa, of all the continents, has been left out of the western economic development model. Africa has really been abandoned by the west, while the missionary movement, as I knew it, has lost momentum and even credibility in a world that reflects on it in much the same way as I have just done. There is indeed a more fundamentalist missionary effort abroad, but it bears little resemblance to the missionary world that I knew, and even less to the ideal of mutually enhancing exchange.

I often think it would have been wonderful to have done it all differently. For a while, in those heady post-'60s years, it felt like we might truly engage with the African psyche, rather than simply attempt to get it to wear a western hat. For a time, it felt like we could really give the Christian message to the people of Kenya, without strings, and assist them in integrating it into their own wonderful world.

For a brief moment, there was no divine dichotomy, no question of whose God: rather, there was one incomprehensible mystery that is the foundation and ground of every expression of life; an expanded world that contains us all, alive and dead; an interconnected world that relates through knowing and loving, and enriches all of us in the process.

On Hot Summer Days

Michele A. Scirocco

In that room
On that August day
When my father
Dying and living
All at once
Began to pass
When his spirit shifted
And I could sense
It in flight
It was on that staccato bridge
Linking life and death
That I felt it
A quiet
So deep
So bottomless
So full
Of everything
All at once
That I was moved
To a different place
Inside myself
The questions doubts

Releasing their firm grip
Were washed away
With the tears
I shed
On his pillow
On his face
Frozen
But still with me
Now
And
Though I still cry
On hot summer days
I no longer feel fear
Of the end
But instead
I embrace the journey

Michele Scirocco lives in Weehawken, NJ. She teaches college and high school English. Currently, she is working on a book of her poetry and a literary novel. Her poetry has been featured in on-line journals and is forthcoming in print magazines, including Willard & Maple *and* Sparks Magazine.

Praying Our Way Through Doubt

Fredrick Zydek

There's a cold fear nested at the heart
of every doubt, stress sharp as a sword,
hidden agendas, genuine reality waiting
to be sorted out like unmatched socks.

The truth is there are no cheap tickets
to Heaven, no shortcuts to Nirvana,
not a single free ride to enlightenment.
We must learn to ride towards them

on the backs of prayers and meditation.
There will be huge clues along the way.
Learning to be converted from nine
to five is a big step. Getting rid of our

unlovely behavior is another. We must
learn to nibble at the warm promise
of silence, go empty-handed through
the landscapes of loss, the prisons

of melancholy and betrayal. We must
claim sacred ground one doubt at a time,
pray until we can sort out the differences
between angels and serpents, go among

them wrapped in voices of our own faith,
mantras, contemplations, acts of pure
devotion and pleas. We must do the work
of warriors using the agendas of real saints.

Night Watch

Dorothy Holley

Luminous in the street light
the only color of the night
the lily pale yellow by day
stands out against the dark hedge,
against the gray of the street.
On the sidewalk late night strollers
turn their heads to the lilies
emitting a golden glow
like that surrounding Mary
as she stands at the moon's cusp
with cherubs and lilies below.
As we recall the serenity
of her face with hands clasped
we feel protected in the night.

Fredrick Zydek is a Nebraskan writer with eight collections of poetry. He has more than 800 publication credits. He says he is either incredibly prolific or incredibly old—or a little of both.

Dorothy Holley is an 82-year-old poet who began writing poetry later in life, after raising her family. Her first book of poetry, A Whole Quart Jar, *was published last summer with such success that her publisher is soon to publish a second volume on the theme of the garden, with poems, garden notes, and pictures.*

To Everything, A Season . . .

Braja Sorensen

I was eight years old when death knocked on my door, barged into my life, and left its muddy prints throughout every room. When it left it took my father with it, and the world changed. Like it's going to again now. I have a few months left to live, the doctors say. Inevitably my mind is filled with memories, good and bad.

Can we trust memories? Does a pale memory, aged over time, give off a light strong enough to leak into the cracked features of stories chiseled into the solid rock of a child's mind? Or would truth—factual accounts in black and white—actually spoil the preciousness, the essence of memories? Maybe it doesn't even matter if they're real. They made us, but would we change if we knew the truth? Perhaps we've made them our truth, taken the edge off the memories. Just as dust motes in a shaft of light filter the harshness,

Braja Sorensen is an award-winning poet, an editor, and a teacher of writing in India. Her work has appeared in several international journals. She is an associate member of the International Poets Society and her poetry has won awards in Australia and Britain. She is currently working on her fifth non-fiction book. Her first novel, Goodbye, Ruby Sky, *is now being published in the United States. Her autobiography, from which this piece is taken, is being considered for publication in New Zealand. Braja lives in Mayapur, West Bengal, with her Danish husband, artist Jahnu Sorensen.*

blurring the edges, so the slightly skewered details blur a memory, leaving it softer, recognizable—claimable. That's possibly more like it.

There are cultures in the world that celebrate death. My childhood memories after the death of my father may sound okay if I relate them to you, but there was no one celebrating, that's for sure. It seems everything about death has to be realized in hindsight. Nothing is apparent at the time; only that things have changed inevitably. Before my father died, my life was interwoven with my brothers, my sisters, my mother; we did things as a family. While death affected us differently as individuals, collectively it fractured us. Sometimes learning is like stepping off a cliff: there's no going back once you know it. That's how death felt to me when I was eight years old.

I felt the ramifications of death right into my twenties. That's what happens when it's not dealt with, and I definitely hadn't faced up to the death of my father. No one in our family talked about Dad's death. It was the unspeakable. That was bound to make for some extraordinary times. Then again, trauma takes ordinary beyond passé. Ordinary memories can't compare to the electric, mind-slamming, all-consuming reputation of a good trauma. They limp into insignificance, a blank space. After a while, without realizing it, they evaporate, and then what's left is the trauma. With a blink of the eye, the trauma has become the ordinary.

The thing is, death is heavy. Not only at the time. The fallout has to happen somewhere. For me it happened in my teens, but I didn't feel the effects until my twenties. All of us, my four brothers and sisters and

I, stumbled into our teenage years in a fog, reeling from the sudden and violent death of our wonderful, happy, kind, and loving father. No one "dealt" with us. There was nothing to say, nothing to read, no courses to attend to learn how to cope. It was 1972, and self-help was twenty years away, or might as well have been. Reeling, we entered a period of our lives that should have been carefree and happy and full of warm memories, a solid building block for future successes, family lives, and careers.

Although it was twenty years after death first visited me, I would say that death was the reason I turned to religion. In a way, there was nowhere else to turn. Actually, religion is probably the wrong word for it. Calling it that would limit what I can say, and maybe block someone from hearing. Even to me it has worn-out connotations. I used to drink religiously. Didn't get me far. So let's scrub the "religion" bit. Call it what it is. Spirituality; the real thing. The search for the self. The Holy Grail. The hunt for red October (okay, just kidding).

Death is coming again now, and I'm preparing for it, and I have some understanding of things spiritual. I don't think there's anything else. Is there? Somewhere along the line, I became a Hare Krishna. I didn't know what I'd gotten myself into. It turned out to be the best thing I'd ever done. I don't know if it started that way. I can't say I liked that many people who were Hare Krishnas. Some of them were downright weird. Possibly still are. But most were genuine.

I have some regrets—they've camped outside the door of my mind and are peacefully protesting my ignorance of them. They aren't making too much noise:

they seem to have some respect, at least, for the dying. Good for them. Shall I let them in? Maybe I'll end up regretting addressing my regrets—where does it end? Then again, perhaps that's meant to be a private meeting, that one—not fit for public consumption. Something should remain sacred, after all.

"Sacred." There's a word that comes up often when you're facing death. What is sacred? In a profane world, who is to be the judge of that? And "spiritual": a word that's practically lost all meaning. These two words have become two very important words to me. My guru once said, "Daily ritual is the art of making life sacred." That's beautiful, isn't it? Those things we devote ourselves to daily; our spiritual practices; things that elevate our consciousness, awaken the soul. And by that I don't mean rich chocolate cake and warm movies that make you cry. I mean real spirituality. Getting in contact with the spiritual nature, spiritual energy. Discovering the self. That's something else altogether. That's the source of all things sacred. And those two things—the spiritual and the sacred—are all that are left to me. I wish I'd paid them more attention when I had a whole life to live, because at this stage, all I've really got to work with is who I am right now. I'm hoping it's enough.

There's a mad woman near where I live. She's Indian of course, because I live in India. But she covers her face with layers and layers of white face powder. The result isn't that she looks whiter, but rather like a very strange shade of grayish-brown sludge. I see her every night from my roof, just around sunset. She wanders through the park next to my house on her way to the temple. She makes me think a lot of things. Like, at the end of it all, when we're facing death—

whether we're ready for it or not—it doesn't matter how we see ourselves; or how we want to see ourselves. All that matters is what we are.

The problem is there's no school or college or university that actually teaches us who we are, what we are. I mean, think about it: all that study, all those supposedly intelligent people leaving the hallowed halls of education in droves to make their mark on the world—none of them even know who they are. Does it matter that they "achieve" something in this short and mostly bleak life? What does it mean at the end? In the same way that white face powder is not going to make that woman white, so no amount of education or success in this world is going to give any information on who we really are. And we all have our own form of "white face powder"; we are all guilty of trying to gloss over the reality, to make it something it's not, make ourselves something we're not. For some it's alcohol, for others drugs, for others it's hard work, even.

So then: who am I? Of all the different memories of my life, all the different ages I've been, which is the one that forms the basis, the core of who I am? They all have one common factor: me. My presence. So sometimes I remember a three-year-old, sometimes I remember a twelve-year-old, sometimes a twenty-eight-year-old. But "I" am the common denominator in all of it. The real me is within those memories: the one within all of them who remembers always, everything. The soul. That's always there. Where it goes after death is a cause of many great and learned discussions. So that's where I'm at now: focusing on the destination of the soul. And doing so makes me realize that death is okay: we can embrace it and transcend it and that is an amazing thing.

End of Days. . .

It's nearly another day—2:15 a.m. The best time of the day to absorb myself in contemplation of destinations, the quality of departure. Soon, another hour, and the fear will start to creep in. I don't like the mornings any more, whereas once they were full of promise. They are too silent, hold too many hours, unlimited possibilities. After accepting the immediacy of one's mortality, it's rather cruel to spend twenty-four hours proving it wrong. I'd like to go at this time, pre-dawn. The Bhagavad-gétä says it's the most auspicious time to die. I reckon it might be right. Maybe it will be today.

I am beginning to hope so. . .

Whatever state of being one remembers when he
quits his body, that state he will attain without fail.
Engage your mind always in thinking of Me,
become My devotee, offer obeisances to Me
and worship Me. Being completely absorbed in Me,
surely you will come to Me.

[Krishna to Arjuna, Bhagavad-gétä As It Is]

THE END.

Editor's Note: This piece was written during a time of health problems, and is a meditative reflection on facing one's own mortality. The author has since learned that the problems were no cause for alarm, but her thought was, "Whether it's now or later, it's going to come to me. What am I doing? How does death look in my life?. . . in our last days we really do have to question who we are, what we've become, how that happened, and if we're content with that. . . My focus in writing is to encourage people to think, to experience a thought and follow it through via their own method of prayer, meditation, and process. I hope that's what I have done here."

PRAYERS

A Blessing For Clouds

Michael S. Glaser

Let us be thankful for clouds,
blocking the sun, cooling the day. . .
though they are often maligned
as carriers of thunder and hail
let us remember
the nourishing rain they bring,
let us remember the sacred
in every mysterious thing.

I Find You, Lord

Rainer Marie Rilke

I find you, Lord, in all things and in all
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself.

Michael S. Glaser was named Poet Laureate of Maryland in August, 2004. Dr. Glaser has served as head of the Division of Arts and Letters, and chair of the English department at St. Mary's College of Maryland, and also serves as a Poet-in-the-Schools. He and wife Kathleen are the proud parents of five grown children.

Mercy

Arthur LeClair

"Who lifts the weak out of the dust, and raises the poor from the dunghill."

~ Psalm 113

The groove inside my heart
    is well fashioned
    by my pride
and I have filled it
with ten thousand trinkets—
    a candlelight way of living.

Nevertheless, o nevertheless,
You found me out
(Mercy mastering me).
All my precious constructs
    lie open
in the brightness of the sun.

Why is saying yes
    so difficult?
Why isn't once enough?
The delightfull mystery
    never ends:
Mercy within Mercy within Mercy.

Arthur LeClair lives in Centennial, Colorado. He is a former pastoral counselor who has contributed over the years to SACRED JOURNEY.

Grandmother Tree

Susan Gregg-Schroeder

I have been to the Mission San Luis Rey in Southern California many times as both a retreat participant and retreat leader. This mission was founded by the Spanish Franciscans in 1798 and housed the largest Native American Indian population in the chain of missions—well over two thousand. Life at the mission flourished until 1833 when it was taken over by the Mexican government and sold to private land owners.

The Mission could barely feed or clothe the remaining 400 Indians, and it quickly fell into decay. It would not be until California became the 31st state of the Union that Mission San Luis Rey would begin to experience new life.

The Mission was transformed into a Franciscan missionary college, ruined buildings were restored, and new buildings were added. In the 1970s, the Mission added a retreat center which provides a place of peace and beauty for those seeking rest from their harried lives. Following the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, the Mission grounds are alive with plants and animals. Squirrels, rabbits,

Susan Gregg-Schroeder is Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church, and author of In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression. *Please visit her online at www.mentalhealthministries.net.*

butterflies, birds of all sorts and even lizards, both inside and out, find their home in this refuge.

But each time I come to the Mission, I am drawn to a large pepper tree in the center courtyard. It is the first pepper tree in California, brought by ship from Peru, probably by the Padres. It was planted at the Mission around 1830.

This tree reminds me of the wise Grandmother Tree in the Disney movie, Pocahontas. One can only imagine what this tree has seen and how she has grown from a young sapling, when the Mission was strong and vital, to the old tree that now stands with its gnarled and twisted trunk. She has experienced seasons of abundance and seasons of drought, both in the cycle of nature and the cycle of the community in which she lives. Some of her limbs need to be propped up with steel stilts, much like an old woman leaning on a cane.

As I walk around the trunk of the tree, images appear in the twisted areas and the deep, dark holes which never see the sunlight. I feel drawn to that tree as a place of safety and protection as the long, green branches, extending almost to the ground, surround me. Yet as I lie on the cool grass under Grandmother Tree, flickers of light filter through her leaves and dance among the shadows below.

I draw wisdom from this Grandmother Tree. I receive strength to continue in my own journey, even through the times of drought and decay. I am blessed with the gift of hope that I, like this tree, can experience seasons of great hardship and great joy, and yet continue to thrive and change. Each time I spend time with my Grandmother Tree, she shares a bit more of her wisdom, born of experience. And I leave the Mission carrying the spirit of that tree back to my daily life.

Just Showing Up

Ann Kline

It is with great dismay that I realize, after eight years of studious prayer and meditation, I feel no closer to God than I ever did. This fall, at the Jewish New Year, I stood on a bridge over Rock Creek throwing my sins (in the form of bread) into the water. It was the same bridge I've stood on for many years and the sins, sad to say, were also much the same. I left with the same good intentions as I always have, and with the knowledge that I would be back again next year. After all this time, I feel I am no better a person than I ever was.

So, what is the good of all my spiritual practice? Why do I sit in silence, coaxing my wayward mind and heart toward God? Why do I strive to stir my soup, wash my dishes, and kiss the mezuzah on my door with present-centered attention if I only find myself once more getting impatient in traffic, fearful of the future, or angry at what I see on the nightly news? If God's transforming love is truly at work in me, shouldn't I be better, different, holy by now? The distractions in my life are endless. The pain and problems of the world

Ann Kline is a spiritual director, writer, and retreat leader, and a co-founder of Lev Tahor: A Center for Jewish Soulwork in the Washington, D.C. area.

are undiminished. Why do I bother to keep bringing my mind and heart back and back again to silence, to a point where everything is just what it is, where I sit accepting this moment as gift? A gift that, I'm afraid, the next moment will find me quite ungrateful for.

In our society we tend to diminish the value of steady, dogged, stick-to-it-iveness. Either we want things to come easily and conveniently or we respect the effort only after we see the evidence of some reward. Otherwise, we are being foolish or dreamers, or both. What is the point, we want to know before we start. We naturally want to have something to show for it all.

At this moment in my life, however, I have very little to show for all those hours of sitting in silence, alone with God. I am not enlightened and I am not "better" at life or loving. I am beginning to understand that I haven't known what I was looking for. In fact, I realize there is absolutely nothing for me to seek, nowhere to go. Persistence itself is the "point" of all my practice—the turning again and again to what is true and real, right now. There is nothing else. God is nowhere else. Persistence is not "a means to a means to a means to," to quote Randall Jarrell. Persistence is what we are about in living.

Norman Fischer, in his book, *Taking Our Places,* wrote that:

> In the shaping of our lives, we pay a fair amount of attention to skill and effort, to intelligence, talent, good looks, technique, training, education, and so on. But it seems to me that a primary virtue is the simple ability to be persistent with what you

do, to not look for quick fixes or miracle cures, to be able to go on with a good feeling come what may.

What this says to me about the beauty of persistence (and is Fischer's point) is that in the persistent turning and returning of our attention to what is true and real, this moment, we learn to trust. Much of my "trust" has come from my intelligence, my experience, my ability to figure things out. That may be a good insurance policy for living, but it is not trust. Trust is more summed up in the Zen koan "every day is a good day." It does not need to prove itself. We just show up for what is.

It is the persistence of just showing up, over and over again, that is faith. It is a faith that finds God in each precious moment of starting anew, which is there in every breath. In those silent hours of my sitting with God just as I am, I am already what I seek to be: a person who lives for God. My persistence is the gift of water upon the rough rock of my desire. It is with persistence that my desire is polished into a smooth faith that can live each moment as it is and let it go.

That kind of faith is at best a glimmer more in God's eye than in my own right now. I only know that in turning and returning my attention back to the silence, my intention back to stirring the soup, over and over, I am all that I need to be.

This story has also appeared in Shalem News, *the newsletter of the Shalem Institute, 5430 Grosvenor Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814, 301-897-7334, www.shalem.org.*

Anne Cornwall

BOOK REVIEWS

Please enjoy these publishers' reviews of books that have recently come across our desk.

With Open Hands
by Henri Nouwen
Foreword by Sue Monk Kidd
Ave Maria Press, 2006
www.avemariapress.com
800-282-1865 x1

Twenty-seven years ago, With Open Hands *helped to wake me to the immense "openness" in which God is given, and it goes on waking readers today. That is its timeless gift.*
~ Sue Monk Kidd

This is a new edition of *With Open Hands,* Henri J.M. Nouwen's first book on spirituality, and one which has been a treasured introduction to prayer for over thirty years. *With Open Hands* gently encourages an open, trusting stance toward God and offers insight to the components of prayer: silence, acceptance, hope, compassion, and prophetic criticism. This edition has been updated for a new generation, with moving photography and a foreword by Sue Monk Kidd.

With Open Hands offers sustenance for the spiritual hunger of contemporary seekers. With gentle simplicity and challenging insight, Nouwen invites us to embark on a prayerful journey, to release our tightly clenched fists and open our hands to God. One of Nouwen's earliest

books, it was first published in 1972. Nouwen revised it in 1994 to reflect the changes in the world and the church, providing inclusive language as well as adding a prayer and a reflection question after each chapter.

Nouwen gently leads readers through six chapters: "With Clenched Fists," "Prayer and Silence," "Prayer and Acceptance," "Prayer and Hope," "Prayer and Compassion," "Prayer and Prophetic Criticism."

Henri Nouwen is one of the most popular spiritual writers of our time. He wrote more than forty books, among them the best-selling *Can You Drink the Cup?* and *With Open Hands*. He taught at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Notre Dame. From 1986 until his death in 1996, he taught and ministered to physically and mentally challenged men and women as a member of the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada.

The Soul of the Story: Meetings with Remarkable People
by Rabbi David Zeller
Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006
www.jewishlights.com
802-457-4000 or 800-962-4544

Many who embark on a spiritual quest discover that the people they meet along the way ultimately point them back home, into the very soul of the religious tradition they had left behind. So it was with David Zeller whose spiritual odyssey took him across the globe, through traditions including Zen Buddhism and Hinduism, and into relationship with some of the world's most compelling spiritual teachers.

Thoughtful and endearing, provocative and witty,

Zeller's delightful stories recall his meetings with the likes of Carl Jung, Shlomo Carlebach, Alan Watts, Ram Dass, Carlos Castaneda, and many others—and the experiences and teachings that ultimately allowed him to rediscover his own spiritual heritage.

From the stimulating days of California's Bay Area in the 1960s to a kibbutz in Israel, to the time he spent as a sadhu in India living outdoors and bathing in rivers, these stories of Zeller's spiritual adventures remind us all that even the most meandering path can, in the end, bring us to our true spiritual home.

Rabbi David Zeller, storyteller, teacher, and musician, is a pioneer in Jewish spirituality and transpersonal psychology. He helped establish the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology; the Network of Conscious Judaism; Yakar: Center for Tradition and Creativity; and Shevet: Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation. He has produced five albums of meditative and healing music. He travels and lectures extensively throughout the United States and Europe several times each year to teach and perform. Learn more about him at www.davidzeller.org.

Love's Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition Translated from the Persian by David and Sabrineh Fideler
New World Library, 2006
www.newworldlibrary.com
800-972-6657 or 415-884-2100

For several years, the thirteenth-century mystical poet Rumi has been the best-selling poet in the United States. But his is just one voice in Sufi poetry, the

timeless expression of Persian mysticism. The poems collected in *Love's Alchemy: Poems from the Sufi Tradition* represent all the major poets, including Rumi, in this tradition.

While many recent bestsellers have been interpretations from other English translations, in *Love's Alchemy,* translators David and Sabrineh Fideler work from the original Persian sources. Their book offers faithful yet elegant translations from 150 of the best poems written in ruba'i form: concise, tightly focused meditations.

In their introduction, the Fidelers offer a brief explanation of the symbolic code used in Persian poetry. For instance, the Beloved or Friend is a reference to God, but it may simultaneously refer to a human being in whom the qualities are reflected like a mirror. The Fidelers also include an extensive glossary and notes that place the poems in cultural, historical, and religious context.

The Fidelers speak to the deeper vision of the human condition and the spiritual path inherent in the poetry. They explain how the many layers of Persian poetry allow Sufi poets to transmit great depths of meaning, even in a poem of four lines. They write, "It provides the reader with an ongoing source of delight—for as the reader's understanding continues to expand, the same poetry can continue to reveal deeper levels of meaning over the course of many years."

David Fideler has taught at the college level, written widely on the spiritual traditions of the Western world, and teaches courses on Sufi poetry. He holds a Ph.D in philosophy and cultural studies. Sabrineh Fideler holds a degree in English-Persian translation from Azad University in Iran and teaches Persian to English speakers. They live in western Michigan.

Anne Cornwall

ENDPIECE

All the Joy You Need

Steve Goodier

Thomas Aquinas once said, "No one can live without joy." But many people try. And the reason is often simply because they don't know how to be happy! They are so intent on the three Ps—power, prosperity and prestige—that they miss out on joy.

Try to imagine this picture. It is a photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who pioneered modern photography as an art form during the early decades of the twentieth century. He became known for his photographs of apparent contradictions: pictures that left mysteries unexplained.

One of his famous photographs was shot in a poor section of Spain in the 1930s. The picture depicts a run-down alley surrounded by decaying walls, strewn with rubble randomly stacked in thick piles lying on the street, and riddled with bullet holes dotting gray walls. The setting alone evokes feelings of sadness and despair.

But then . . . the contradiction. Within the grim alley children are playing. They wear dirty and tattered clothes, as one might expect in such a setting, but like playing children everywhere, they laugh with carefree joy. In the foreground, a tiny boy on crutches hobbles away from two other boys, his face lit up with a broad grin. One boy is laughing so hard he has to hold his side. Others lean on the cracked walls, beaming with delight.

It is easy to spot the contrast—and the point. Joy amidst the rubble of life. Laughter amongst its ruins.

We cannot avoid pain, however hard we try. But we can avoid joy. We cannot escape hardship and trouble, but we can miss out on much of life's peace and laughter.

If you feel as if you could use more joy, try this:

> Spend time daily doing something you enjoy. Do those things that bring inner peace. Learn to laugh heartily and frequently. Cultivate within yourself an attitude of hope. Fill each day with as much love as it can possibly hold.

You'll still have plenty of problems, but through it all, you'll find all the joy you will ever need.

Steve Goodier is an author and professional speaker with a B.A. in anthropology and sociology and an M.Div. degree from Emory University. His books and newsletter can be found online at http://LifeSupportSystem.com.

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